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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON KAZAKHSTANI JOURNALISTS CONFLICT WITH  
INFORMATION MINISTER

Ref: A) Astana 652, B) 06 Almaty 1750

11. (SBU) Summary: The rapid escalation of the conflict between Era TV and Information Minister Yermukhamet Yertysbayev in early March was just as rapidly defused by mid-month. Yertysbayev apologized March 14 "to all" whom he "might have offended" during a live television program. After Yertysbayev met with an Era TV journalist March 16, Era rescinded its legal actions against the ministry, and the ministry in turn dropped its suit against Era for violating the law requiring 50/50 Russian/Kazakh-language programming. The newspaper Vremya has also put on hold its plans to sue the minister. End summary.

Prime Minister Asks Information Minister to Apologize  
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12. (U) The rapid escalation of the conflict between Era TV and Information Minister Yermukhamet Yertysbayev in early March was just as rapidly defused two weeks later. On March 14, during a live call-in program about Kazakhstan's property legalization campaign broadcast nationwide by official Kazakhstan-1, Chairman of Kazakhstan's Union of Journalists Seitkazy Matayev phoned in, asking Kazakhstan's prime minister to explain his position on Yertysbayev's "tactless behavior toward journalists" that had "discredited state authority in the entire country." Prime Minister Masimov responded, "Yermukhamet Kabidinovich is my cabinet colleague. I should naturally be on his side, but it is also difficult for me to legally assess this issue. As a human being, from an ethical point of view, I would recommend that you, Yereke [polite and informal for Yermukhamet], as a man, apologize to that particular journalist." (Per Ref A, Yertysbayev was shown on Channel 31 television news excluding Era TV journalist Yulia Isakova from a pull-aside interview following a government meeting on March 2.) Yertysbayev responded, "If I offended someone inadvertently as claimed, I am always ready to apologize, and I apologize to all whom I offended."

Era Makes Separate Peace, Cancels Lawsuits  
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13. (SBU) On March 16, Yertysbayev had a private meeting at his office with Era TV reporter Isakova. On the station's evening news, Mirbulat Kunbayev, Era's general director, announced that "the conflict between the minister of culture and information and an Era TV journalist is over" and that Isakova was "satisfied with the results of the meeting." He said Era TV was therefore recalling its "previously filed lawsuits." (Per Ref A, the station had initiated legal action to annul the January frequency tender and had filed suit against the ministry for inhibiting the lawful activity of their correspondent.) An embassy source in the media community told emboff April 9 that presidential advisor Ardak Doszhan, former Deputy Minister of Information, holds shares in Era TV, and that may

have eased the way for settling the dispute. Three days later, the ministry dropped its suit against Era TV for the alleged violation of the "50/50" law requiring equal Russian and Kazakh-language programming. As a condition of the settlement, Era TV was required to provide a concept of Kazakh language program development to be approved by the ministry's committee on information and archives.

Vremya "Blinks"

14. (SBU) Regarding the lawsuit the progressive daily newspaper Vremya had intended to file against the information minister to "defend the business reputation of the paper" (Ref A), deputy editor Marat Asipov told emboff April 9 that the paper had planned to file suit, but had not yet taken any specific actions. Asipov said the decision on whether to follow through with a lawsuit would be made by editor-in-chief Igor Meltser.

Frequency Tender Still Disputed

15. (U) Before the resolution of Era's dispute, Mazhilis Deputy Serik Abdrakhmanov said in an interview with Era on March 12 that he was "pressured" as a member of the frequency commission and received 10 phone calls advising him which television companies should receive the frequencies. He said when he tried to question why one channel was favored over another, he was told only that "it should be this way," without specifying who exactly was giving him instructions. He said he quit the commission after the first session.

16. (U) Several media, including opposition weekly Republika on March 16, reported another question posed by Seitkazy Matayev to Prime Minister Massimov during the call-in program March 14: Matayev asked how the head of the Pavlodar channel Irbis could have been awarded

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frequencies in the tender if he had been denied Kazakhstani citizenship. Matayev reportedly said that the national security law prohibited non-citizens from owning media, and he asked the prime minister whether the tender should therefore be annulled. In a conversation with emboff April 9, Matayev said he had also provided a written query to the prime minister, but had so far not received a response.

Comment From Kazakhstani Media Representatives

17. (SBU) An article in the March 23 issue of the pro-government weekly Altyn Orda offered opinions of several media analysts that Minister Yertysbayev is defending the interests of "Eurasia Group" chairman and billionaire Aleksandr Mashkevich, allegedly the owner of Ria Arna TV, which received seven frequencies in the January tender. (Altyn Orda is rumored to be affiliated with Minister of Economy and Budget Planning Aslan Musin.) Kasym Amanzholov, a former correspondent of Kazakhstan 1, who quit after Yertysbayev's reorganization of the channel last May (Ref B), thinks that dismissing Yertysbayev would not bring about any real change in media and society, but would be a democratic gesture, showing the authorities conceding to popular demand. Bigeldin Gabdullin, editor-in-chief of the pro-government Central Asia Monitor, was quoted in the article saying journalists in conflict with Yertysbayev are not representative of the journalist community because the minister still has many supporters.

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